

foundations of the long humanist tradition of autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography, from *Robinson Crusoe* through *Great Expectations* to *A La Recherche du temps perdu*, with its consoling promise of achieving self-knowledge. Beckett anticipated Derrida's notion of the inevitable "différance" (sic) of verbal discourse: the "I" that speaks always being different from the "I" that is spoken of, the precise fitting of language to reality always being deferred. "These few general remarks to begin with." That usually bland formula is blackly comic in this epistemological vacuum. How shall the narrator proceed, "by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered" (i.e., self-contradiction) or "By aporia pure and simple?" Aporia is a favourite trope of deconstructionist critics, because it epitomizes the way in which all texts undermine their own claims to a determinate meaning; but the narrator's later admission, "that I say aporia without knowing what it means," is a trumping of aporia.

"There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless." What is extraordinary is that this bleakly pessimistic and relentlessly sceptical text is not deeply depressing to read, but on the contrary funny, affecting, and in a surprising way affirmative of the survival of the human spirit *in extremis*. Its famous last words are: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

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The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.

JANE AUSTEN *Northanger Abbey* (1818)

Ralph looked at him dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood - Simon was dead - and Jack had . . . The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected by that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too. And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.

The officer, surrounded by these noises, was moved and a little embarrassed. He turned away to give them time to pull themselves together; and waited, allowing his eyes to rest on the trim cruiser in the distance.

WILLIAM GOLDING *Lord of the Flies* (1954)

"CONCLUSIONS are the weak points of most authors," George Eliot remarked, "but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation." To Victorian novelists endings were apt to be particularly troublesome, because they were always under pressure from readers and publishers to provide a happy one. The last chapter was known in the trade as the "wind-up", which Henry James sarcastically described as "a distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks." James himself pioneered the "open" ending characteristic of modern fiction, often stopping the novel in the middle of a conversation, leaving a phrase hanging resonantly, but ambiguously, in the air: "'Then there we are,' said Strether." (*The Ambassadors*)

As Jane Austen pointed out in a metafictional aside in *Northanger Abbey*, a novelist cannot conceal the timing of the end of the story (as a dramatist or film-maker can, for instance) because of the tell-tale compression of the pages. When John Fowles provides a mock-Victorian wind-up to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (in which Charles settles down happily with Ernestina) we are not deceived, for a quarter of the book remains to be read. Going on with the story of Charles's quest for Sarah, Fowles offers us two more alternative endings – one that ends happily for the hero, and the other unhappily. He invites us to choose between them, but tacitly encourages us to see the second as more authentic, not just because it is sadder, but because it is more open, with the sense of life going on into an uncertain future.

Perhaps we should distinguish between the end of a novel's story – the resolution or deliberate non-resolution of the narrative questions it has raised in the minds of its readers – and the last page or two of the text, which often act as a kind of epilogue or postscript, a gentle deceleration of the discourse as it draws to a halt. But this scarcely applies to the novels of Sir William Golding, whose last pages have a way of throwing everything that has gone before into a new and surprising light. *Pincher Martin* (1956), for instance, seems to be the story of a torpedoed sailor's desperate and finally unsuccessful struggle to survive on a bare rock in the middle of the Atlantic, but the final chapter reveals that he died

with his boots on – so the whole narrative must be reinterpreted as some kind of drowning vision or purgatorial experience after death. The ending of *The Paper Men* (1984) reserves its final punch till the narrator's very last word, which is interrupted by a bullet: "How the devil did Rick L. Tucker manage to get hold of a gun"

That kind of last-minute twist is generally more typical of the short story than of the novel. Indeed one might say that the short story is essentially "end-oriented", inasmuch as one begins a short story in the expectation of soon reaching its conclusion, whereas one embarks upon a novel with no very precise idea of when one will finish it. We tend to read a short story in a single sitting, drawn along by the magnetic power of its anticipated conclusion; whereas we pick up and put down a novel at irregular intervals, and may be positively sorry to come to the end of it. Novelists of old used to exploit this sentimental bond formed between the reader and the novel during the reading experience. Fielding, for instance begins the last Book of *Tom Jones* with "A Farewell to the Reader":

We are now, reader, arrived at the last stage of our long journey. As we have therefore, travelled together through so many pages, let us behave to one another like fellow-travellers, in a stage coach, who have passed several days in the company of each other; and who, notwithstanding any bickerings or little animosities which may have occurred on the road, generally make up at last, and mount, for the last time, into their vehicle with cheerfulness and good humour; since after this one stage, it may possibly happen to us, as it commonly happens to them, never to meet more.

The conclusion of *The Lord of the Flies* could easily have been a comfortable and reassuring one, because it introduces an adult perspective in the last few pages of what, up to that point, has been a "boys' story", a *Coral Island*-style adventure, that goes horribly wrong. A party of British schoolboys, who crash-land on a tropical island in unspecified circumstances (though there are hints of a war), rapidly revert to savagery and superstition. Freed from the restraints of civilized, adult society, and subject to hunger, loneliness and fear, the behaviour of the playground degenerates into

tribal violence. Two boys die, and the hero, Ralph, is fleeing for his life from a pack of bloodthirsty pursuers wielding wooden spears, and a deliberately started forest fire, when he runs full-tilt into a naval officer who has just landed on the beach, his ship alerted by the smoke. "Fun and games," the officer comments, regarding the boys with their makeshift weapons and warpaint.

For the reader, the apparition of the officer is almost as startling, and almost as great a relief, as it is for Ralph. We have been so absorbed in the story, and so involved in Ralph's plight, that we have forgotten that he and his cruel enemies are prepubescent boys. Suddenly, through the officer's eyes, we see them for what they really are, a bunch of dirty and unkempt children. But Golding does not allow this effect to undermine the essential truth of what has gone before, or make the restoration of "normality" into a comforting happy ending. The naval officer will never comprehend the experience that Ralph (and vicariously the reader) has undergone, eloquently recapitulated in the penultimate paragraph: "the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy." He will never understand why Ralph's sobbing spreads infectiously through the other boys. "He turned away, to give them time to pull themselves together; and waited, allowing his eyes to rest on the trim cruiser in the distance." The last sentence of any story acquires a certain resonance merely by virtue of being the last, but this one is particularly rich in irony. The adult's gaze at the "trim cruiser" implies complacency, evasion of the truth, and complicity in an institutionalized form of violence - modern warfare - that is equivalent to, as well as different from, the primitive violence of the castaway boys.

Readers acquainted with my *Changing Places* may recall that the passage from *Northanger Abbey* at the head of this section is cited by Philip Swallow and quoted by Morris Zapp on the last page of that novel. Philip invokes it to illustrate an important difference between an audience's experience of the end of a film, and a reader's experience of the end of a novel:

"That's something the novelist can't help giving away, isn't it, that his novel is shortly coming to an end? . . . he can't disguise the tell-tale compression of the pages . . . As you're reading, you're aware that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film there's no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent, than they used to be. There's no way of telling which frame is going to be the last. The film is going along, just as life goes along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and at any point the director chooses, without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just . . . end."

At this point in the book, Philip is represented as a character in a film-script, and immediately after his speech the novel ends, thus:

PHILIP shrugs. The camera stops, freezing him in mid-gesture.

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I ended the novel in this fashion for several, interrelated reasons. In one aspect, it is a sexual comedy of "long-range wifeswapping": the story concerns the fortunes of two academics, one British and one American, who, exchanging jobs in 1969, have affairs with each other's wives. But the two principal characters exchange much else in the course of the story - values, attitudes, language - and almost every incident in one location has its analogue or mirror-image in the other. Developing this highly symmetrical and perhaps predictable plot, I felt the need to provide some variety and surprise for the reader on another level of the text, and accordingly wrote each chapter in a different style or format. The first shift is comparatively inconspicuous - from present-tense narration in Chapter One to past-tense narration in Chapter Two. But the third chapter is in epistolary form, and the fourth consists of extracts from newspapers and other documents the characters are supposed to be reading. The fifth chapter is conventional in style, but deviates from the cross-cutting pattern of the previous chapters, presenting the interconnected experiences of the two main characters in consecutive chunks.

As the novel progressed I became increasingly conscious of the problem of how to end it in a way which would be satisfying on both the formal and the narrative levels. As regards the former, it was obvious that the final chapter must exhibit the most striking and surprising shift in narrative form, or risk being an aesthetic anticlimax. As regards the narrative level, I found myself unwilling to resolve the wife-swapping plot, partly because that would mean also resolving the cultural plot. A decision by Philip to stick with Desirée Zapp, for instance, would also entail a decision by him to stay in America or a willingness on her part to settle in England, and so on. I did not want to have to decide, as implied author, in favour of this partnership or that, this culture or that. But how could I "get away with" an ending of radical indeterminacy for a plot that had up till then been as regular and symmetrical in structure as a quadrille?

The idea of writing the last chapter (which is called "Ending") in the form of a filmscript seemed to solve all these problems at a stroke. First of all, such a format satisfied the need for a climactic deviation from "normal" fictional discourse. Secondly it freed me, as implied author, from the obligation to pass judgment on, or to arbitrate between, the claims of the four main characters, since there is no textual trace of the author's voice in a filmscript, consisting as it does of dialogue and impersonal, objective descriptions of the characters' outward behaviour. Philip, Desirée, Morris and Hilary meet in New York, halfway between the West Coast of America and the West Midlands of England, to discuss their marital problems, and in the course of a few days they discuss every possible resolution of the story – each couple to divorce and cross-marry, each couple to reunite, each couple to separate but not remarry, etc. etc. – but without reaching any conclusion. By having Philip draw attention to the fact that films are more amenable to unresolved endings than novels, while being represented as a character in a film inside a novel, I thought I had found a way to justify, by a kind of metafictional joke, my own refusal to resolve the story of *Changing Places*. In fact, so strong – atavistically strong – is the human desire for certainty, resolution and closure, that not all readers were satisfied by this ending, and some have

complained to me that they felt cheated by it. But it satisfied *me* (and had the incidental bonus that when I decided to make further use of the principal characters in a subsequent novel, *Small World*, I had a free hand in developing their life-histories).

The point of this anecdote is, however, not to defend the ending of *Changing Places*, but to demonstrate that deciding how to handle it involved many other aspects of the novel, aspects that I have discussed elsewhere in this book under various headings. For example: (1) Point of View (the film-scenario form obviated the need to select a point of view, with the privileging of the p.o.v. character that is inevitably entailed) (2) Suspense (postponing till the very end an answer to the narrative question, how will the double adultery plot be resolved?) (3) Surprise (refusing to answer that question) (4) Intertextuality (the allusion to Jane Austen, which is natural and appropriate in that both Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp have specialized in the analysis of her work) (5) Staying on the Surface (another effect of the film-scenario format) (6) Titles and Chapters (the punning title of the novel – places that change, places where one changes, positions that are exchanged – suggested a series of cognate chapter headings – "Flying", "Settling", "Corresponding" etc. and finally "Ending", which is noun, participle and gerund: this is the end of the book, this is how it ends, this is how I am ending it) (7) Metafiction (the joke of the last lines is on the reader and his/her expectations, but also connects with a running metafictional joke about a how-to-do-it book called *Let's Write a Novel*, which Morris Zapp finds in Philip Swallow's office, and which provides a sardonic commentary on the novel's own shifting techniques. "Every novel must tell a story," it begins. "And there are three types of story, the story that ends happily, the story that ends unhappily, and the story that ends neither happily nor unhappily, or, in other words, doesn't really end at all.")

I could, without too much difficulty, discuss this ending under other headings, such as Defamiliarization, Repetition, The Experimental Novel, The Comic Novel, Epiphany, Coincidence, Irony, Motivation, Ideas, and Aporia, but I will not labour the point – which is, simply, that decisions about particular aspects or

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components of a novel are never taken in isolation, but affect, and are affected by, all its other aspects and components. A novel is a *Gestalt*, a German word for which there is no exact English equivalent, defined in my dictionary as "a perceptual pattern or structure possessing qualities as a whole that cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts."

THE END

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